

Defence against Mr Galalae's charges

In his appeal against the decision of expelling him from the Political Philosophy online course, Mr Galalae raises several accusations against me. In this short defence my aim is to show that his accusations (with one possible exception) are ill-founded and unjustified.

After my reconstructions of the events I have included several Appendices, which collect the relevant evidence. They are organised as follows:

Appendix A: emails between Mr Galalae and I.

Appendix B: correspondence with anonymous student (June 1st).

Appendix C: 'Mill on multiple vote' discussion.

Appendix D: Emails with Claire Kelly.

Appendix E: The Common Room row.

The central thesis in Mr Galalae's defence

The keystone of Mr Galalae's defence is that his expulsion is not motivated by his breach of netiquette in a discussion in the Common Room, but actually has its origins in feelings of hostility towards him prompted by the social and political views he developed in two discussions: "Plato's argument" in the *Responding to Plato* Forum, and "Direct democracy" in the *Rousseau and democracy* Forum.

The main accusations against me, which are my present concern here, are based on a simple hypothesis: up to May 25th I have behaved

friendly towards Mr Galalae, but after he posted his insights about direct democracy on May 26th I turned against him on account of my dislike of his political views and I began to plot to have him removed from the course.

My contention here is that this hypothesis cannot stand any accurate and complete analysis of the facts. The much simpler truth, supported by overwhelming evidence, is that Mr Galalae had lost his temper on June 2nd in the Common Room and expressed such lack of respect and contempt for his fellow students, that his presence in the forums was no longer compatible with a friendly and cooperative atmosphere. In order to see that this latter is the real explanation of the events that led to Mr Galalae's expulsion we need to follow step by step the events as they unfolded from June 26th onward. Such a close analysis will reveal that what happened is that Mr Galalae progressively adopted a more aggressive and confrontational attitude and that this led me to a mild reaction at first, and then, after June 2nd, to the quick realisation that the situation had degenerated and disciplinary sanctions were unavoidable.

Preamble: the relationship between Mr Galalae and I up to May 25th

Although Mr Galalae suggests at the beginning of his Appeal that an early accident happened in the *State of Nature* forum "Locke and Hobbes discussion" (May 4th and 5th) had made our relationship uneasy, this is plainly misleading, if not false. Our interactions both in the forums and in our email communications clearly demonstrate that the incident has been completely overcome and that there was respect and esteem (a good sample of my appreciations of Mr Galalae's postings in the period between May 5th and 26th is provided in Mr Galalae's own Appeal, pp.

43-8). Our email communications reveal that our interactions were actually quite friendly. This is unequivocally demonstrated by the following facts: 1) Mr Galalae proposed to arrange a meeting in the summer when he was expecting to come to Oxford and I accepted; 2) when Mr Galalae had to give up his plan to do a Master Degree in Oxford I did my best to console him (and apparently I was successful); 3) Mr Galalae sent me a research proposal that he had submitted to a British university and I generously gave him detailed comments, although this was by no means part of my duties. Our complete exchange of emails in May is to be found in Appendix A below.

The week under scrutiny: what really happened between May 26th and June 2nd?

Did this friendly relationship suddenly come to an end as a consequence of Mr Galalae's political views? The answer is simply 'no'.

First of all the views expressed by Mr Galalae in the "Plato's argument" discussion did not generate any negative comment or reaction on my part. On the contrary there are appreciative and encouraging remarks only. See for instance my posting in 'Plato's argument' discussion on May 21st (03:03 pm) and May 23rd (03:06 pm).

If anything has annoyed me it must therefore be the long posting in the "Direct Democracy" discussion. And indeed, what seems to have convinced Mr Galalae that I disliked his view is my alleged refusal to answer his request of a comment on his long and elaborate proposal (including his so-called 'Universal stabilizing principle' and the 'Galalae's equilibrium'). Now, the reason for my failing to answer Mr

Galalae's request is very simple. His posting was extremely long and I did not read it all. I had a look at it, enough to realize that he was putting forward his own views at great length and I was wondering what to do, for I had the impression that such a posting was turning the forum into a discussion of Mr Galalae's views. However, since Mr Galalae's views were not off track (they were his views on direct democracy, and this latter was the topic of the discussion), I decided to wait and see how other students reacted. Since several students engaged with him, I decided not to intervene and to let the discussion develop. As a matter of fact, I have paid very little attention to that discussion between May 26th and May 28st, while I have been away and unable to log into the course from May 29th to May 31st. My policy is usually to participate in the discussion only to stimulate debate, to offer clarifications and to help accurate interpretations of the readings, or to prevent the discussion to go off track or towards dead ends. That discussion was not off topic and was growing, so I let it develop spontaneously.

Finally, Mr Galalae renewed his request for comment in a private email on June 2nd. Needless to say, that at this point I was too busy dealing with the row in the Common Room to have the time (and the will as well) to give to Mr Galalae comments about his theory of direct democracy.

That particular week was also an extremely busy one for me. On the 26th I began teaching a new course at St Clare's, a course that I had designed but never thought before. Furthermore, the course was originally planned for a different format (14 weeks, 3 hours a week and was now delivered in 4 weeks, 10 hours a week). In the first week I was therefore

very busy in understanding how best to reorganize the course to adapt it to a different format that was new to me.

Moreover, that weekend I had to go to a conference in Rijeka, where I was to present a paper. It should therefore not be so surprising that that week I did not spend so much time on the online course, which was, apparently, running smoothly. If one checks the log of my activity in the course, it will be apparent that I did check that the 'Rousseau and direct democracy' discussion was progressing, but I have spent very little time on it. If I am guilty of something, it is of having slightly neglected that particular discussion. Finally, as I had told the students through a notice in the common room, I have been away from Friday 29th to Sunday 31st.

So what was my reaction to Mr Galalae's posting in the 'Direct Democracy' discussion on May 26th? Quite simply I have never read the whole of it carefully. I was not very happy that he had posted such a long message and that he had completely taken the attention away from Rousseau, but since a rather lively discussion was developing as a reaction to his posting, I decided to let it be and keep my hands off.

When I came back from the trip to Rijeka, I found a message from a student (which I will leave anonymous) complaining about Mr Galalae's posting in the 'Mill on multiple vote' discussion in the *Mill and democracy* forum. The student found Mr Galalae's comment sexist and potentially offensive. I thanked the student for writing to me, but after reading twice Mr Galalae's posting I thought that it was not meant to be sexist, though I agreed that the images and language he used were an instance of bad taste. However, I invited the student to express his dislike for the language and to correct the alleged inaccuracies in Mr Galalae's treatment of Mary Wollstonecraft, but I thought that the conditions for

removing the message or report the message to the course manager did not obtain.

Had I been determined to get rid of Mr Galalae's, I would have seized this opportunity to issue a warning against him. But as a matter of fact I only posted a forceful rejoinder criticizing (not for the first time) Mr Galalae's disposition to attribute hidden and self-serving motives to other people. But in spite of my firm criticism of this habit of his, I did also post two other replies to his postings, which were obviously appreciative. (See Appendix B for my correspondence with the student who made the complaint, and Appendix C for Mr Galalae's postings on the 'Mill on multiple vote discussion' and my replies).

These facts show that before June 2nd there was no sign of any hostility towards Mr Galalae on my part. This is strikingly confirmed by our correspondence before my trip to Rijeka (see Appendix A). Not only I found the time to comment on Mr Galalae's research proposal though I was very busy, but he obviously expresses very warm appreciations towards me, demonstrating that up to May 28th he had no reason whatsoever to think that I had anything against him.

The accident: the row in the common room on June 2nd

As I have tried to show so far, up to June 2nd, Mr Galalae's postings have occasionally proved controversial, but they had by no means been the subject of any prejudicial hostility. But on June 2nd, Mr Galalae mistakenly interpreted Ms Portella's posting in the *Common Room* as blaming him for her lack of participation in the forum. How happened that he did so patently misunderstand her message, I do not know. Ms Portella had been participating regularly and valuably to the forums up

to the preceding week. She was definitely not one of the students who should have felt particularly apologetic about her absence. Furthermore, she explained her absence in the last week on account of a sinus infection that had bothered her and forced her to take antibiotics. This was her explanation for her lack of participation during the only week in which she had not been active. Later on she expressed her agreement with Mr Middleton, who had suggested that shorter messages would make it easier to have more interactive discussions. To this Mr Galalae replied pleading guilty of having posted many long contributions, but he defended the need to articulate at some length complex philosophical ideas. Incidentally, on this topic I have some sympathy for Mr Galalae's position, as it is demonstrated by the fact that I have never imposed restrictions on the length of the contributions in my online courses. Only after the incident of Mr Galalae's expulsion I have decided to set a limit of 250 words to the postings.

After having read again several times the messages in the common room, I now recognize that Ms Portella's reply to Mr Galalae had too much bite. Her first paragraph goes as follows:

Kevin, philosophy does lend itself well to headlines. Actually, from my perspective, short sentences implies a great knowledge. No one is able to write a short sentence if he/she does not know really well the subject, that's why the great philosophers were able to make sense of themselves in just one sentence: they knew what they were talking about.

It is possible to interpret this paragraph as suggesting that Mr Galalae's lack of concision comes from insufficient knowledge of the topics. This suggestion is neither nice nor fair. Perhaps it would have deserved some

critical comments on my part. Yet, I believe that it could have been addressed politely. Unfortunately Mr Galalae's answer began with a paragraph that oversteps the boundaries of polite conversation, in that it makes insinuations about Ms Portella's private life and motives. Moreover, it is the first instance in which Mr Galalae puts forward his mistaken idea that Ms Portella blamed him for her absence from the forums. It is worth quoting the whole posting, because if we remove the first paragraph, the rest of the reply shows that it was possible to reply to Ms Portella sharply and forcefully without resorting to unjustifiable and unpleasant personal attacks.

Perhaps you ought to spread the blame a little bit, Gloria. In reading your explanation for your recent absence from the fora one would believe that I have singlehandedly prevented you from contributing. Wouldn't it have been closer to the truth if you had said that the reasons for your absence are several: a recent cold, two children and a husband to take care of, language barrier, professional duties, laziness perhaps, the need to sleep nine hours a night maybe, etc?

Further to that, my inability to express myself in headlines, as you would have it, is a reflection of my lack of knowledge. I apologise for not living up to your high standards, but we all have to make due with what little fate has endowed us with. I guess I don't know what I'm talking about. Be that as it may, I am eager to be illuminated by you, if you would rise to the challenge.

"That's why the great philosophers were able to make sense of themselves in just one sentence", you say. Pray show one philosopher who has explained his/her Lebensanschauung in just one sentence and I will henceforth express myself in just one phrase every time I post. And that's a promise.

The precedent you cite (i.e. your previous course) as an example to emulate for the brevity of its postings need not be our cast to follow. Every course and every class has a life of its own. But if you had ever taught you would know that.

What I find particularly distasteful in the first paragraph is that Mr Galalae moves away from the topic under discussion and switches the subject to the personal character and features of the person addressed. To me this is something that ought not to be done, especially in an online course, where we deal with people of whom we do not (and cannot) have personal acquaintance. In dealing with strangers one should forbear from questioning the other person and her/his motives. Nobody who is not unusually confrontational would like to participate in forums where strangers feel free to attack you personally whenever they dislike your views. This is what I have tried to explain to Mr Galalae in an email on June 3rd:

(...) Two things have not been accepted. One is your habit of attacking some of the ideas that you oppose not on their own merit, but by suggesting that they spring from ignoble motives. (The implication of this attitude is that who disagrees is not simply wrong, but evil. I hope you see this is the attitude of all religious fanatics and political repressive regimes). When you do that to dead philosophers it is a lack of charity, but when you do that with your fellow students this becomes a personal attack from a stranger and how can you fail to see that nobody accepts to have one's own integrity questioned by a stranger? (...)

However, at that point the discussion went out of control and Ms Portella and Mr Galalae exchanged reciprocal accusations and insults. Unfortunately Mr Galalae soon included other students as the target of his verbal aggression:

Well, I guess the time has come to call a spade a spade. People like you Gloria have stopped posting because of one or all of the following reasons:

1. They find my superior intellect humbling.
2. They dislike my socio-political theories but have no moral or logical arguments to discount them.
3. The truths I painstakingly spell out force them to look deep inside their hearts and face their demons, be they deep-seated prejudices, class conceit, or false loyalties.

Is that concise enough for you?

And repeated the general attack:

Dear all,

I find your sense of justice oddly uneven considering that it is Gloria who attempted to scapegoat me for her absence from the forums, and then, in finding herself challenged, resorted to irrational insults.

If anyone has a problem with the “length” of my postings or the “forcefulness” of my arguments, then you have all failed to win a fair dispute and ought to have the integrity to accept defeat and to acknowledge the true reasons of your voluntary withdrawals. After all, I have not forced anyone to engage with me and I certainly did not put a gun to anyone’s head to read my lengthy postings.

(...)

After Mr Galale had written such things, I thought that nobody would have felt any longer at ease in the forums and that the prospect of being the target of though personal attacks would have discouraged almost everybody from participating in the forums. Furthermore the contempt showed by Mr Galalae for his fellow students would have affected the

quality of the discussion, putting too much pressure on every contributor on pain of looking intellectually unable.

As a consequence on June 3rd in the morning I emailed to Claire Kelly (the course manager) to inform her about the row in the Political Philosophy course and to express my opinion that the presence of Mr Galalae in the forums was no longer compatible with a successful run of the course (see my first email to Claire Kelly on June 3rd in Appendix D). I still think that my interpretation of the situation was on the whole sound and reasonable and that Mr Galalae's behaviour had left us with no alternative but to remove him from the forums.

Mr Galalae's readiness to resort to personal attack and his contempt towards his fellow students are the only reasons for his expulsion from the course. His political ideas and my personal feelings did not play any role in our decision. I have already argued that I did not care about the specific content of Mr Galalae's political ideas and that my only concern was about the fact that his own opinion were becoming the focus of the discussion rather than the ideas of the authors on the syllabus. I have also tried to show that before June 2nd there was no personal resentment towards Mr Galalae on my part. Here it is important to stress that the decision of expelling him was taken after Claire Kelly, Marianne Talbot and I have consulted each other about what to do. Claire Kelly and Marianne Talbot came to the same conclusion without any attempt on my part to push or persuade them. Actually, before the decision was taken I even wrote the following to Claire Kelly (June 3rd):

(...) I think that removing Kevin from the forums is inevitable to restore a relaxed and calm atmosphere. If we want to be more lenient on him, perhaps we can allow him to access the site and submit his assignments, while banning him from participating in the forums.

The last suggestion proved technically non feasible and so we decided to remove him from the class. However, had I been motivated by resentment and bitter feelings towards Mr Galalae I would not have

suggested the possibility of a milder course of action. The simple truth is that there is only one reason for Mr Galalae's expulsion from the class: his breach of netiquette in the Common Room, as I explained to him on June 3rd:

Kevin,
if you are cut off from the course it will not be because you have posted many contributions to the forums or because some were rather long: it will be because of what you wrote in the common room. You are an intelligent person and you can certainly see that.

Regards

Giovanni

The only allegation made by Mr Galalae that is worth serious consideration is whether we have been even handed in the different treatment reserved to him and to Ms Portella. Perhaps our decision is questionable and I am sure that there is room for reasonable disagreement on this particular issue. But at this point it is not up to me to say whether we have been wise judges or not.

Have I ever insulted Mr Galalae?

In his Appeal Mr Galalae raises several accusations against me, and I do not think that most of them deserve to be taken seriously. Nevertheless, there is one charge that I find particularly annoying and worth of some close analysis. It is the accusation of having insulted Mr Galalae in private emails. This charge is raised at least in two places in his appeal and in both occasions there is a reference to one (and only one) particular email. According to Mr Galalae:

Dr. De Grandis revealed his dislike of my ideals rather clearly and forcefully in a private email where he went as far as accusing me of being no better than “religious fanatics and political repressive regimes”, a comparison that I took issue with and that I found to be utterly inappropriate.” (Appeal, p. 16).

A similar point is raised again later on when he accuses me of having “launched a series of criticisms and insults at me in private emails” (Appeal, p. 48).

Now the email in which I would have abused Mr Galalae is the following:

Date: Wed, 3 Jun 2009 13:58:41 +0100
From: tutor.politicalphilo@conted.ox.ac.uk
To: kgalalae@hotmail.com

Kevin,

I will ignore what is in the P.S. and simply point out one thing to you. This whole issue is unpleasant enough for everybody. I am trying to learn a lesson from the mistakes that I have made. I think you should better drop the explanation that you have spoken some inconvenient truth, exposed people's hidden motives and demonstrated your intellectual superiority and that has generated mean feelings against you. I don't think this was the case. Two things have not been accepted. One is **your habit of attacking some of the ideas that you oppose not on their own merit, but by suggesting that they spring from ignoble motives. (The implication of this attitude is that who disagrees is not simply wrong, but evil. I hope you see this is the attitude of all religious fanatics and political repressive regimes). When you do that to dead philosophers it is a lack of charity, but when you do that with your fellow students this becomes a personal attack from a stranger and how can you fail to see that nobody accepts to have one's own integrity questioned by a stranger?** The second is that you have subtly tried to force other students to discuss and consider your ideas. I have been stupid in not realizing it earlier, but it became apparent in the direct democracy forum. You have tried to turn the course into a tribunal to express your ideas.

These problems could have been discussed and solved in the common room discussion, but things took another turn that made it impossible to fix the problems.

And this is my last comment on the whole issue.

Regards

Giovanni

Now Mr Galalae completely fails to see the all-important difference between attacking a person and criticizing her/his actions or habits. This is a distinction well known by psychologists, by the rules of politeness, by common sense, by the Bible... They all give us the same advice: criticize the sin, not the sinner. And this is precisely what I have done in my email: I have not likened Mr Galalae to inquisitors and dictators, but I have tried to show him that some of his actions were following the same perverse logic of the actions of these kinds of people. In my email there is no insult and there is no anger. There is only an attempt to show him that he is behaving just like some people he disapproves of. This is a much more urbane form of criticism than questioning people's motives and has a long and venerable tradition (see for instance the story of Prophet Nathan and King David, 2 Samuel 12, 1-25).

I would never insult a student and I have always tried to show the utmost respect for my students. I am confident that an objective analysis of the whole of my correspondence with Mr Galalae cannot but confirm that I have never disrespected him, let alone insulted him.

Conclusion

I have tried to show that the main assumption behind Mr Galalae's thesis that his expulsion was caused by personal resentment and dislike for his political views does not stand a careful analysis of the available evidence. I think that all other accusations (except perhaps the charge of not having been even handed in dealing with him and Ms Portella) are refuted by the available evidence as well.

I will not venture to offer an explanation of why the events took the turn they did. This would imply too much guesswork about Mr Galalae's motives, and I find it distasteful to speculate about people's motives. To me the decisive turning point were the personal attacks on Ms Portella and the other students put forward by Mr Galalae in the Common Room on June 2nd. Yet with the benefit of hindsight I am increasingly perplexed by the email that Mr Galalae sent to me on May 18th:

Hi Giovanni,

I could not help but notice that Ivor and I have become too dominant in the fora discussions. Would you like me to step back to make room for the others? I don't want to be overbearing. On the other hand, I don't want to withhold valuable contributions. Please let me know how to proceed.

Kevin

Since I don't want to attribute any motive to anyone, I would like to ask Mr Galalae the following questions:

- 1) What did he mean exactly by 'stepping back'? Was he offering to withdraw from the discussions, or only to have a lower profile?
- 2) How would he have taken it, if I had asked him to keep his contributions to a minimum? Would he have interpreted such a decision as a violation of his freedom of speech?
- 3) Had I asked him to 'step back' (whatever he meant by this), I should have asked Mr Middleton (Ivor) to do the same, wouldn't I? How could I have asked him to do so? Shall I have written him something along the following lines: 'Dear Ivor, Mr Galalae has graciously offered to step back from the forums to make more

room for others and I have accepted his offer: would you please step back too?? Would this not have been ridiculous?

- 4) Could I have accepted his offer to step back, without raising the suspicion that I was acting out of resentment caused by the incident of May 4th?
- 5) Was he trying to get *carte blanche* from me in order to be deliberately confrontational in the forums?
- 6) How shall we interpret the following statement? "Conceiving an ideal society is within the reach of most any human being, turning it into a living reality is nothing short of divine. Yet I shall try, for I have no choice" (personal email to me, May 28th). Had Mr Galalae decided that his mission was to convert the other students to his political ideas?

An honest answer to the above questions would help us all to understand why things regrettably run out of control.

That is all that I have to say in my defence.